improving low-performing schools: policy implications from research

TRANSFORMATION

Reform Spotlight

Research + policy + practice= transformed schools

Along with my managing editor, Pamela Lutz from AEL, I am delighted by the publication of this initial issue of *TransFormation.*

Over the past decade, my primary work has been in research to determine what interventions work best in transforming low-performing schools. Thus, the title for our new publication: "transform" implies a deep and lasting change in form, nature, or function.

With comprehensive school reform, the school community and other important stakeholders sometimes expect immediate and tangible results, typically improved student test scores. What is often lost is the idea that before student learning improves, positive transformations in teaching, curriculum, and school climate are needed and can be detected.

Our goal in this publication is to let those who legislate or otherwise determine policy know what we're learning from research on school transformation—in "clear talk," not academic jargon.

In each issue, you will hear a variety of different voices. In this space, I'll discuss an important topic of currency (and maybe controversy) concerning school transformation. Inside, researchers will offer policy-related implications of their studies, with one study featured in a little more detail (see pp. 2-3). Each issue will present a nonresearcher's front-line perspective on education reform or intervention (see p. 6). You will also see shorter pieces on newsworthy events or information sources. The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform will contribute a regular column. Whatever the topic, we assure you that we will say it clearly and in an easy-to-use format and style.

We hope *TransFormation* will serve a unique role in communicating to key decision makers what education research shows and implies about school transformation. Our intention is to foster more effective and sustaining applications of education theories and research.

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Supporting "the right stuff"

NASA would never launch a rocket without a clear purpose and destination in mind, or ignore findings gleaned from research and experience, or authorize a mission without establishing support systems and procedures to ensure a high probability of success. Too much is at stake.

The stakes are even higher for those leading American education. Improving schools is not rocket science; it's harder. Faced with the infinite variables schools encounter every day, a NASA engineer might be tempted to say the mission—to leave no child behind—is impossible. But clearly, Americans believe it is one worth trying.

In this issue of *TransFormation,* voices from research and practice speak to policymakers about helping schools develop "the right stuff" to carry out their vital mission.

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Feature

What does it take to sustain comprehensive school reform?

A widely respected education researcher suggests that lasting reforms require the efforts of players at all levels—including policymakers.

For six years, I have been engaged in numerous longitudinal studies of comprehensive school reform. This research has taken me into dozens of schools implementing various externally developed reform designs, and into the offices of district administrators, union representatives, and reform design team leaders.[1]

In the course of my interviews and observations, one question continually arose: What does it take to sustain comprehensive school reform? Some schools I observed successfully sustained reforms over long periods of time, whereas others struggled to implement reforms and later abandoned them.

In analyzing the data from these various studies, often in collaboration with colleagues, I have identified several themes regarding reform sustainability. The most important finding is that reform sustainability is not simply a school-level enterprise. Rather, it is multidirectional: forces at the state, district, school, and classroom levels all interact to shape the longevity of reform.

My analysis of school improvement efforts points to the following conclusions about how policy leaders can help schools implement and sustain comprehensive reform:

Understand and support school reform as a process that is long-term, continuous, and comprehensive. Externally developed reforms are sometimes viewed as quick fixes or cures for "illnesses" such as low reading scores, uninspired teachers, ineffective instructional methods, or incoherent curricula. When reforms targeting isolated problems are not integrated into an overall plan for long-term, continuous improvement, sustainable school change is unlikely as reforms tend to be inserted and abandoned based on short-term gains or losses.

> "The most important finding is that reform sustainability is not simply a school-level enterprise."

Supply incentives and support for individual schools to invest time and deliberate thought in the initial selection of a path to improvement. Schools that drop their reforms almost always exhibit an absence of staff buy-in initially. Staff in these schools are often hurried to make decisions or coerced to go along with the choice of reform, regardless of their true wishes. In schools that sustain reforms, however, educators are more likely to have chosen a reform that they could implement with integrity and for which there is substantial teacher and principal support. Principals should be trained in how to engage their teaching staff in critical inquiry about reform and in how to evaluate school-level data (1) before taking on a reform and (2) for ongoing assessment of its effects.

Encourage schools to adopt reform approaches that are flexible enough to adapt to changing district and state contexts. A reform design's ability to adapt to local circumstances affects its longevity in schools. If teachers

and principals must choose between meeting district and state expectations or those of the reform designers, they will almost always choose the former, and the reform effort will be compromised. Reforms that last are those that help educators meet (and do not conflict with) such local district and state requirements as curriculum standards and provisions for English language learners.

Provide the resources and technical assistance schools and districts need to incorporate and adapt selected reforms to fit local contexts. Teachers and administrators will need time as well as ongoing and supportive technical assistance as they grapple with what a reform design means for their students, curriculum, instruction, and professional lives. This is true for both highly prescriptive and loosely structured reform models. Educators need support in becoming experts in reform, engaging in continual inquiry about the reform, and implementing and sustaining the reform in their own school or district.

Ensure a stable resource base and sufficient flexibility to sustain reforms. Some school reform designs require substantial funding to initiate, implement, and sustain. Those requiring a continual financial outlay might find themselves at risk of instability or expiration. Yet the reforms that are the most comprehensive and meaningful are often the most resource-hungry. States and districts can help by establishing a stable resource base; helping schools select reform models that are financially sustainable; and providing flexibility in staffing, budgeting, and reallocation of resources.

Support local school reform rather than simply mandate it from higher levels. Successful reform requires support from the "top," not just pressure. Reform is less likely to be sustained if district and state policymakers use a carrot-and-stick approach to force reform on local educators; when the funding or support goes away, so will the reform. Instead of assuming a role of monitoring and compliance, more successful approaches focus on providing technical assistance opportunities that build school capacity for improving student achievement.

Broaden the measures of reform success to include more than student test scores. In states where accountability is measured primarily by student scores on standardized tests, schools often abandon reform strategies, before full implementation, in favor of test preparation. Thus high-stakes accountability systems and narrow measures of reform success can inadvertently inhibit dramatic, sustainable change in schools.

There are at least two reasons that gains on standardized test scores are an insufficient measure of reform success: (1) unless schools deliberately align what they teach with what is tested, even dramatic improvements in teaching and learning are not likely to show up in test scores; and (2) sustainable improvements are not likely to produce higher scores in a short period of time. To encourage schools to sustain reforms long enough for them to make a difference, measures of reform success should include (a) other important student outcomes, such as critical thinking, civic virtue, and understanding the value of learning; (b) equity in the educational experiences of and outcomes for diverse racial and linguistic student populations; and (c) the creation of a school culture that fosters continual improvement and teacher development.

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1. Amanda Datnow, "Power and Politics in the Adoption of School Reform Models," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 22*(4), 357-74 (2000), abstracted at www.aera.net/pubs/eepa/abs/eepa2244.htm; Amanda Datnow, Lea Hubbard, and Hugh Mehan, *Scaling Up School Reform* (working title). New York: RoutledgeFalmer Press, in press; and Amanda Datnow and Sam Stringfield, "Working Together for Reliable School Reform," *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk, 5*(1), 183-204 (2000), www.aft.org/edissues/rsa/guide/change/working.htm.

New Institute to evaluate what works

The Education Quality Institute (EQI) is a new, independent organization committed to helping educators, parents, and the public judge the effectiveness of and successfully implement education programs. Anticipated products include a publication and Web site similar to *Consumer Reports,* but with a focus on education programs. The institute promises to deliver timely and dependable evaluations of the latest research on a wide range of education programs, starting with comprehensive school reform models and later turning to reading programs. For more information, please contact Steve Fleischman, Executive Director, Education Quality Institute, 202-661-4739 (voice), 202-624-3181 (fax), educationquality@aol.com.

NCCSR Recommends

Plan now – or pay later

Involving and informing teachers as the school charts a course for reform is crucial.

Research about model selection processes across three New Jersey school districts found that they all shared similar implementation problems—the schools had limited information on the models, there was no significant teacher involvement in the selection, the time frame to make the decision was too short, and many teachers did not consider the model adopted as appropriate for the school. All three districts were attempting to implement whole-school reform designs as the result of a state supreme court decision.

Because effective implementation is a predictor of success in raising student achievement, the researchers' findings indicate the need for supportive actions.

1. Recognize the inherent value of time for planning whole-school reform and the selection of a reform design.

2. Ensure access to resources that help practitioners select a reform design appropriate for their school and develop a real understanding of the selected model.

3. Provide awareness of and access to information that helps practitioners engage the school community in planning, implementing, and sustaining reform.

Researchers also observed that teachers and school communities who approach school improvement as critical inquirers in addressing how to improve student achievement are more likely to view the reform effort as an opportunity, rather than an imposition.

Read a summary of the research by Bari Anhalt Erlichson, Margaret Goertz, and Barbara Turnbull at www.policy.rutgers.edu/cgs/pubs.htm. The full report, *Implementing Whole School Reform in New Jersey: Year One in the First Cohort Schools,* is available by calling the Center for Government Services, 732-932-6340, ext. 628.

About NCCSR

The New Jersey study was selected as "recommended reading" by the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, hosted by The George Washington University in partnership with the Council for Basic Education and the Institute for Educational Leadership. Offerings include an online library, descriptions of whole-school reform models, and publications to keep readers up-to-date on what's happening in research and practice—all available at www.goodschools.gwu.edu.

The importance of being earnest

Schools using an established reform model get the best results when they "stick to the program."

Comprehensive school reform, when fully implemented, can succeed. In its recently completed five-year evaluation of the Comer School Development Program in Detroit, Abt Associates, Inc. found that students in the fully implementing elementary schools outperformed their counterparts in matched comparison schools on standardized achievement tests.[1]

Several factors distinguish the schools that were most successful in implementing the model:

Facilitative principal leadership and compatible working relationships among the leadership team. The principal is the single most important factor in implementation, although the assistant principal and external model facilitator can provide complementary skills. If the principal cannot step out of a traditional authoritarian role, implementation of the model will be compromised.

Welcoming environment. A welcoming environment includes both a readiness for reform and committed staff. Developing strong faculty and administrator buy-in over time is critical. Indifferent staff can be turned around through a supportive leadership team, increasingly visible staff support, and small-scale successes. For teachers who do not want to take part, "no fault" transfers to schools with less emphasis on team-based management could be arranged.

Shared vision. Information about the selected school reform model must be extensive, accurate, and visible in the daily lives of staff.

School size. Effective implementation occurred in small and large schools but was more challenging in very large schools (700 or more students).

Uses of external resources. Fully implementing schools spread external resources more broadly within their schools and typically rated their model facilitators more highly than did staff in the poorer-implementing schools.

Ongoing district and partner supports. Successful implementation was facilitated by monthly problem-solving meetings among the partners in the Comer Schools and Families Initiative, including multiple offices within the Detroit Public Schools, administrators' and teachers' unions, Eastern Michigan University, the Yale Child Study Center, and the Skillman Foundation.

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Dr. Mary Ann Millsap is Abt Associates' project director. The evaluation of Detroit's Comer Schools and Families Initiative was funded by the Skillman Foundation of Detroit. Copies can be obtained through Dr. Millsap: mary_ann_millsap@abtassoc.com.

1. Comer schools operate by consensus and collaboration, with attention to the whole child as well as academic success. Nationwide, more than 400 schools have adopted the Comer model.

Did we leave some children behind?

State education agencies can play a key role in helping schools serve students whose first language is not English.

Students whose first language is not English have, in aggregate, fared poorly in U.S. schools, despite legal requirements that schools respond to their needs. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1995 those who had "difficulty speaking English" constituted 5.3% of the total population of 16- to 24- year-olds, but 44.3% of dropouts.

With a high percentage of the nation's 4.1 million English language learners enrolled in low-performing schools, researchers are now questioning whether and how the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program has responded to the needs of this particular population. Sam Stringfield and associates have already documented English language learners' historic exclusion from overt consideration in the comprehensive school reform movement.[1]

State education agencies, as reviewers of school CSRD applications, have been positioned to recognize and counter this dichotomy. But a review of seven state education agencies' applications for CSRD funding and their solicitations for CSRD proposals from schools suggests that the states had not questioned or remedied the lack of research testing the CSRD models with English language learners. Nor had they overtly encouraged applicant schools to look for programs that demonstrated effectiveness with these students.

Therefore, researchers recommend that the following questions be considered by state and federal policymakers as they address issues related to low-performing schools and the use of externally developed models:

1. Can state education agencies identify an inventory of models with demonstrated effectiveness with English language learners?

2. How can state education agency staff such as Title VII and Title I migrant education coordinators contribute more substantively in the roll-out of CSRD and other programs for low-performing schools?

3. Do those who review proposals for programs aimed at low-performing schools pay specific attention to the needs of English language learners? Or do they allow promises of "including all students" to suffice?

4. Can state education agency staff, especially those overseeing CSRD programs, develop greater expertise with regard to English language learner issues through effective professional development?

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Dr. Edmund T. Hamann is with the Education Alliance at Brown University. The study, conducted by Hamann, Ivana Zuliani, and Matthew Hudak, is titled *English Language Learners, the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Project, and the Role of State Departments of Education.* It is available at the Web site of the Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory at Brown University: www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/pub_index.shtml.

1. Sam Stringfield, Amanda Datnow, Steven Ross, and Florence Snively. "Scaling Up School Restructuring in Multicultural, Multilingual Contexts: Early Observations from Sunland County," *Education and Urban Society, 30*(3):326-57 (1998).

School success requires front-line support

A district leader tells her story about creating climate, structure, and tools for positive change.

As a new superintendent a few years ago, I discovered that my primary challenge in stimulating school improvement was to confront inertia. People were comfortable maintaining the status quo. The control and command functions of the central office were well recognized and accepted. Had I designated new programs and directed school leaders to carry them out, they would have complied. But it was not compliance ("going through the motions") I was after. I wanted results. I wanted to focus the minds and talents of all personnel on our common goal: helping students learn and succeed.

Seven years later, I am happy to report that our district is moving closer to this goal. Multiple assessment data indicate a positive growth pattern for students in our 37 schools. Among staff and parents, enthusiasm and energy are evident.

How did this transformation occur? I think three major points are significant:

Create a context for change. My initial task was to confront people with a simple question: "Why?" As people began to examine their assumptions, the district modeled an inquiry process that made it safe and desirable to question historical practices. Engaging the community to establish a shared vision and values took 18 months. Skipping this initial step is like trying to plant corn without first plowing the ground. To ensure continuous school improvement, such inquiry processes must be integral to ongoing efforts as well.

Recommendation: Maximize flexibility in staffing, curriculum, and budgeting to provide schools much-needed time and resources for initiating and continuing improvements.

Emphasize local control, with central office support. Shifting decisions to the school does not guarantee that student interests are placed first and foremost. We formally adopted essential questions for schools to use in decision making, leaving no room for compromise in setting high expectations and rigorous standards. But local schools retained the flexibility to adopt strategies suited to their unique student needs. We also redesigned the roles and responsibilities of central office staff. Systematic decentralization eliminated redundant positions.

Recommendation: As local schools assume greater control and responsibility for student achievement, recognize and reinforce leaders at higher levels for their ability to support schools, rather than for their ability to maintain hierarchical control functions.

Help local schools use data to guide decisions that put students first. The district provided school profiles that highlighted patterns of demographic shifts and student data ranging from attendance and discipline to achievement assessments. Individual interviews, community "listening forums," and a curriculum management audit provided additional input for decision making.

Recommendation: Provide schools with access to data and analysis expertise.

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Report offers data, insight, direction

To improve schools, improve the systems that support them.

Low-performing schools are an enduring problem, yet lessons learned from research and practice show that schools can improve dramatically if the right conditions and supports are in place—and if local efforts are effectively supported at the district, state, and federal levels. That is the central message in a U.S. Department of Education report that examines how schools are designated "low performing," who attends them, and what it takes to turn them around.

Two observations pertain to low-performing schools in general: (1) Each state has different criteria for assessing school progress and determining which schools are "low performing" and (2) Although research has identified seven characteristics present in effective schools (see box), less is known about the *process* of transforming low-performing schools.

The report suggests several ways policy leaders at all levels can support positive action.

Emphasize local control and buy-in of reform efforts. Reform efforts need to fit the site and involve the entire school community. Schools that successfully reform appear to share a four-step process that requires significant time and expertise: needs assessment/goal setting, planning, implementation, and evaluation/feedback.

Build the capacity of states and districts to assist individual schools. In many cases, when states or districts do an inadequate job in helping low-performing schools improve, it is because they themselves lack the capacity to do so. Federal funds and programs should help states and districts build their capacity to assist low-performing schools.

Encourage states to institute a unitary accountability system for Title I and non-Title I schools. More than half of the states have two systems for identifying low-performing schools—one for Title I and one for other schools. In these states, all schools and all students are not being held to the same standards, and opportunities to coordinate the allocation of resources may be lost.

Encourage states and the federal government to work together to improve data collection. So that appropriate programs for assisting schools can be designed and administered, timely, high-quality data must be reported to state and federal departments of education.

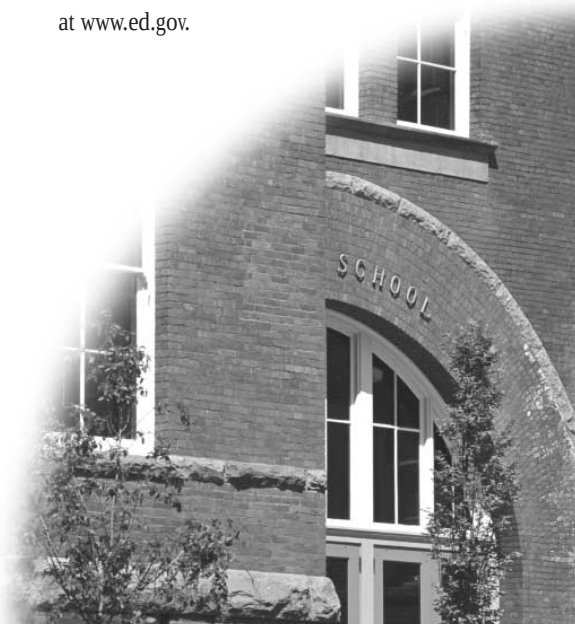
Support research into effective processes for transforming schools. There are significant gaps in research and data: What processes are most effective in turning around low-performing schools? What is the best way to build the capacity of districts and states? How can the education system offer meaningful school choice while strengthening all schools in the district?

State-by-state data are included in the 65-page first annual *School Improvement Report,* published in January 2001. The report is online at the U.S. Department of Education's Low-Performing Schools Web site: www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/lps/pubsres.html.

Seven characteristics of high-performing schools

1. Curriculum and assessment are based on high standards for student achievement.
2. Teachers and administrators are accountable for meeting school goals.
3. A safe, orderly environment allows students to concentrate on academics.
4. Time spent on instruction is maximized.
5. Teachers and administrators are committed to the school philosophy and mission and have access to high-quality professional development that helps them achieve that mission.
6. Parent and community involvement is at a high level.
7. The school has flexibility in designing curriculum and making personnel and finance decisions.

Other news and reports from the U.S. Department of Education are available at www.ed.gov.



Jargon decoder

CSRD: The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program was designed to give low-performing schools a jump-start to help them improve. As a result of the program, which is part of the FY1998 Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations Act, about 1,800 schools across the nation have received funding to adopt "research-proven" schoolwide reform models, and more schools will soon be added. CSRD schools select models as part of an overall effort to transform the school so that improvement becomes continuous and sustainable. The program must address nine criteria: proven teaching and management methods, comprehensive design, professional development, measurable goals, full school support, parent and community involvement, expert external assistance, evaluation, and coordination of resources. The U.S. Department of Education maintains a CSRD Web site at www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/compreform/.

Comprehensive, schoolwide, whole-school: These interchangeable terms describe an overall approach to school improvement that is currently getting a lot of attention. In schools attempting this type of reform, everyone in the school community commits to ensuring that all decisions and actions are coordinated to contribute to increased academic achievement.

Effective implementation: Doing the right stuff, and doing it the right way.

About us

TransFormation is published twice a year by AEL, Inc., a private, nonprofit corporation. Its purpose is to communicate policy implications of the latest research on school transformation, with special attention to findings relevant to improving low-performing schools. Print subscriptions are available from AEL upon request; issues are also online at www.ael.org/transform. Education researchers whose results and preliminary findings might have implications for policymakers or education decision makers should query the editor: Dr. Steven M. Ross, Research Director, Center for Research in Educational Policy, 325 Browning Hall, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN 38152; 901-678-3413; smross@memphis.edu. Potential contributors may submit previously written papers and articles or a 400-word summary of findings/policy implications. Guidelines are posted at www.ael.org/transform.

What CSRD researchers say

AEL offers a CD-ROM and booklet summarizing the conclusions of researchers participating the the Second Annual Symposium on Research and Evaluation Related to Comprehensive School Reform; contact the AEL Distribution Center at 800-624-9120 or caldwelc@ael.org. Symposium highlights are available from NCCSR at www. goodschools.gwu.edu/.

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